

The Passion Conundrum

Passion is an essential requirement for success. But can there be too much passion? Is passion sometimes actually a handbrake on success?

Passion is a key element of many a successful venture. It's often that secret ingredient needed to overcome seemingly insurmountable hurdles. Look behind any successful venture, whether in the commercial or not-for-profit world, and you'll find passionate people who have been a key part in making the organisation successful. Their individual passion has been integral to creating something much bigger than themselves.

Apple is a product of Steve Jobs' passion. The Fred Hollows Foundation exists and does great work eliminating avoidable blindness thanks to Fred's passion. While both those people have sadly passed on, their passion created something special, and they managed to share their passion and positively infect others who now carry on the cause. However it doesn't need to be a famous organisation to see evidence of passion. Look into almost any organisation and you'll find a passionate driver or drivers.

Passion is an essential ingredient in living a fulfilling life. It's what allows us to keep pushing to create something more than just the mundane and the known. It drives us forward and allows us to grow as individuals, and sometimes with what we create; to progress as societies.

So what exactly is passion? The ubiquitous Wikipedia tells us it is "an intense emotion, strong enthusiasm, a feeling of unusual excitement, a compelling feeling or desire for something." Interestingly the word comes from an ancient Greek verb *paskho* meaning "to suffer". The ancient Greek philosophers also recognised that passion is an especially strong emotion and which often makes it impossible for us to listen to reason.

And therein lies the passion conundrum...passion is a double edged sword.

In my observations of numerous organisations, the passion that has got them to where they are is often the same reason they stop developing and moving forward. The passionate emotion of the leader/driver is so strong that it can stop them seeing what may be common sense to others. They become blinded, or at the very least blinkered, by their passion. They then miss seeing what they need in order to move on to the next stage of progression.

So how does all of this relate to organisations?

Organisations need passionate people within them if the organisation is to reach its true potential. Ideally these passions need to be harnessed to help the organisation move forward. The passions don't all need to be the same. But they do need to be aligned to the same strategic direction. This can be a challenging management exercise in understanding and acknowledging the different passions and then ensuring they are directed and aligned enough to help meet the strategic objective.

The danger of passions within organisations is when they work against the strategy and hence are counter-productive. Imagine a group of cars all racing towards the same destination, but all taking different roads in different directions. This can be especially challenging when one considers that a key feature of passionate people is that they tend to work long and hard towards their passions. This can translate to their car going especially fast in the wrong direction.

If the passion fuelled effort cannot be re-directed into line with the organisation's strategy you have what is sometimes termed a "toxic performer" and a parting of the ways is generally preferable for the health and future of both the organisation and the individual.

The passion handbrake in the NFP sector

Interestingly the biggest organisational passion challenges seem to be in not-for-profit organisations. This is perhaps understandable if one considers some of the common features of many NFPs in New Zealand.

- They are often started by one or two individuals passionate about their cause
- The nature of the cause, whether it be a sport or pastime, or a charity providing a social good, engenders strong passionate input and reactions
- There is a heavy predominance of volunteer effort involved – without payment the sense of fulfilment from the passion outlet becomes the reward
- The organisation and cause is often the main outlet for people with time on their hands
- The founder or founders is/are often heavily involved for a long time – The amount they have given “for the cause” engenders an incredibly strong sense of ownership for the organisation and also for the way they have done things

If a business is not making money or delivering its products or services efficiently it will generally go out of business. Brutal perhaps, but this is just the law of the economic jungle. Survival of the fittest. Accordingly management of a successful business focuses closely on its financial health. It also takes prompt action to address any issues within it.

Interestingly however NFPs often survive where a business wouldn't. This is because they commonly operate on a model that involves receiving non-traditional economic assistance. That is, they receive considerable volunteer resources in time and other stakeholder support via donations of money, goods and/or services. This translates to them often being able to survive when a comparable for-profit business would fail financially.

However just because an entity survives does not mean it is necessarily effective. Surviving is very different to thriving! Many NFPs do not reach their potential because the passion of a few impedes them from objectively assessing where their organisation is at. Good governance in any organisation dictates that its governing body should regularly assess how effectively and efficiently they are delivering on the organisation's purpose. But if the governing body is blinkered by their passion and as the Greek philosophers said; unable to even listen to reason, then it will merely perpetuate the status quo. Common blinkered issues in the NFP sector are:

- being like the ‘frog in the hot water’ and not recognising significant changes
- not facing up to the need for new models or new ways of working
- not recognising the need to take the hard decisions – to be cruel to be kind. This especially concerns addressing sub-standard performance
- not being open to collaboration, consolidation or joining with others in the sector to achieve a better outcome
- not letting go of the reins and giving others within the organisation opportunities to develop and use their initiative and ideas
- lack of talent development and succession planning

Sadly we see such issues at governance and/or management/operational levels. At an individual person level the worst examples of misplaced passion result in driving good people out of NFP organisations and causes. It also tends to leave them totally disenchanted. At an organisational level the organisations usually deliver very poorly on their purpose or reason for being, and in some cases eventually totally implode.

So What To Do? - Tips for Thriving Through Passion

- Consider the passion conundrum at organisations you are involved with
- Appreciate that passion is essential to successful organisations and motivates individuals – ensure that individuals understand their passions and that there is a good fit to their roles
- Understand the importance of passion to positively infect others in our organisations to greater heights
- Recognise that our passions can leave us blinkered – remember to step back and be objective.
- Build in systematic objectivity to organisational systems and processes
- Appointment of independent members of the governing body and regular refreshing of board personnel
- Seek the wise counsel of others to help achieve objectivity

To truly see; first we must open our eyes.



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